

The Abandoned Doll (Opuštěná panenka)

Author: Josef Bor

First Published: 1961

Translations: German (*Die verlassene Puppe*, 1964); Hungarian (*A gazdátlan baba*, 1964); Bulgarian (*Izostavenata kukla*, 1965).

About the Author: Josef Bor, originally Bondy, was born in 1906 into a Czech-Jewish family in Ostrava. He studied law and became a lawyer. His promising career came to an abrupt end after the beginning of World War II. In 1942, his whole family, among them his wife and his two little daughters, was deported to Theresienstadt and later, in 1944, to Auschwitz-Birkenau. There, Bondy witnessed his family being murdered in the gas chamber, whereas he himself was selected for forced labour in the concentration camps of Monowice and Buchenwald. In April 1945 he was liberated near Jena. After the war, Bor married again and took up a post in the Czechoslovak Ministry of Defence. At the beginning of the 1950s, in connection with the Slánský trial, Bor got into political trouble and lost his employment in the ministry. After several positions in Košice and Prague he started his literary career in the early sixties. In 1966, he retired due to his health. Up to his death in 1979 in Prague, Bor dedicated himself to the dialogue between Christians and Jews.

Further Important Publication: *Tereziňské rekviem* (1963, → *The Terežín Requiem*; novella).

Content and Interpretation

The novel *The Abandoned Doll* was influenced by the author's own horrible experiences in the concentration and death camps of the Nazi regime. Bor began creating his work in 1951 (Dobeš, 1965, p. 4). Being inexperienced in writing literature he found support from the famous Jewish-Czech translator and journalist Pavel Eisner (p. 4). After its publication in 1961 the work immediately achieved great success so that further editions followed in 1962 and 1965.

The relatively comprehensive novel (330 pages in the Czech original) consists of four parts that differ in composition and style. The first three parts are divided into many short chapters and are narrated from changing points of view, whereas the last chapter presents a continuous, almost homogenous narration. The title of the first part is *The Sluice* (Šlojska). This part shows the fate of the Jews from Kutná Hora in Central Bohemia who were deported to the Theresienstadt Ghetto in 1942, among them the family of the novel's protagonist Jan (Honza) Breuer. The action is comprised of the time from the plans for the deportation, up to the arrival of the transport at Theresienstadt. Within the 23 chapters of this part of the novel we find a great variety of scenes from,

among others, the private lives of people being transported, from the organisation and assembly of the transport, but also from the Nazi milieu. Breuer, an energetic man with wide influence within the Jewish community, is delegated to organise the transport. After the transport's arrival at Theresienstadt, it is his task to carry out negotiations with the Elders of the Jewish self-administration who have to decide on who will be transported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz and other death camps. Despite his strenuous efforts, in the end Breuer cannot prevent his sister's and her family's deportation and death in the gas chamber. Parts two and three, *The Theresienstadt March* (Terezínský pochod) and *On the Ruins of the Ghetto* (Na troskách ghetta), show the life and daily work of Breuer and his remaining family up to the mass transports in October of 1944 and, beyond that, again present a wide range of scenes from everyday life at the Theresienstadt Ghetto, e.g. from the Jewish self-administration, the smuggler milieu, the rich cultural activities in the ghetto, where numerous renowned Jewish artists were interned, and the Nazi headquarters. Vladimír Forst in his review of *The Abandoned Doll* refers to this structural complexity as a "colourful kaleidoscope of all kinds of events from the Theresienstadt Ghetto" (Forst, 1961, p. 548). This "kaleidoscopic" narration, however, comes to an abrupt end with the fourth and final part. This part entitled *The Darkness before the Dawn* (Temno před úsvitem), is not divided into chapters at all and is nearly exclusively narrated from the point of view of Jan Breuer who, after the arrival of the last Theresienstadt transport at Auschwitz, loses the rest of his family, including his wife and daughters, to the gas chamber. After this, the readers become witnesses to his way of suffering at the camps of Monowice, Gliwice and Buchenwald as well as several arduous death marches. All these horrid experiences engender a growing dissolution of ego in Breuer who in the end feels like a person without any individuality. In the narrator's words, Breuer is a mere "Number". In the novel's final scene showing the protagonist's liberation near Jena, Breuer undergoes a process of rebirth, lastly regaining his individuality and his name. In an emotional outburst, he asks himself what all this suffering was for:

The prisoners joyfully cheer and wave their hands. Some of them, however, remain silent while standing still.

Also the Number is silent.

He stands there gaunt, lousy, filthy. A something without a soul, feeling, will or desire.

Suddenly, he is shocked by a terrible thought.

Why?

Why him, and not his wife and children? Why all this?

Why?

The questions penetrate into his brain wildly beating all of his nerves and convulsively flashing through his whole body.

And the Number gradually realises that he is again becoming a human being.

He weeps. (Bor, 1961, p. 330)

Literary criticism has largely welcomed *The Abandoned Doll*, although there have also been reservations. So, e.g., the critic Jiří Opelík characterised the novel as a “precious testimony” (Opelík, 1961, p. 7), but also saw deficiencies:

It vacillates between being a documentary and fiction, between mosaic and narration. The book gets hard going, in the beginning it thrills the reader only with its wealth of material, but not with its conception. (p. 7)

Main Topics and Problems

The idea that *The Abandoned Doll* is a work of documentary value, but with artistic shortcomings runs like a common thread through the text’s history of reception. This prompts the question, why Bor did, after all, choose a literary genre, when his aspiration was really merely a documentary one? And if there are reasons for the author’s decision towards literature: are the critical notes actually justified?

This rather compendious summary of *The Abandoned Doll* already shows that the novel has a great deal to do with the traumatic events the author himself had to go through in Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and the other camps. Several critics even refer to the work as an autobiography (see, e.g. Vavřík, 1961, p. 5). There is undoubtedly a huge abundance of details in the text that have clear parallels with events in Bor’s/Bondy’s life during the war. But there are also significant differences between the novel and the writer’s biographic reality such as the protagonist’s name (Jan Breuer instead of Josef Bondy) or the name of his wife (Duška Breuerová instead of Edita Bondyová), whereas the names of the daughters are the same in both fiction and reality: Věra and Hana.

Apart from such rather secondary details, the major question, however, is, why the largely inexperienced writer explicitly decided on the use of a literary genre (a novel), although he was free to write a mere documentary text. From a thorough reading of the work, it becomes manifest that Bor’s aims were beyond the scope of bearing witness in the sense of factual truth, i.e. the author did not want to confine himself to the reproduction of events that he had undergone himself. Bor wanted to show life in the Holocaust in its totality and with a maximum of facets. For this purpose he needed additional perspectives – perspectives the real detainee could not have witnessed, at all (e.g., glances into the inner sphere of the Elders within the Jewish self-administration or into the life of the Nazi headquarters, not to mention – in one scene (Bor, 1961, pp. 173ff.) – the immersion into Adolf Eichmann’s world of thoughts when reflecting on the Holocaust in his Berlin office. Such views could only be gained by the help of information from others as well as imagination and fiction. So, if the documentary character of the work is discussed, this to a lesser extent refers to the author’s own experiences in the sense of biographical or historical authenticity. These experiences rather form a creative impulse for Bor’s true concern: to give the reader a broad and detailed picture of the Holocaust and its structure and functioning. Documentariness in this sense is more a literary device than a demand for authenticity. *The Abandoned*

Doll can thus be related to famous works of Holocaust literature such as Peter Weiss' documentary theatre play *The Investigation* (1965), Hanna Krall's documentary prose *Shielding the Flame* (1976) or Richard Glazar's → *Trap with a Green Fence* (1992), which are all based on this device marking the transition from documentary to literature, thus uniting the functional potential of both spheres: the authenticity of individual experience and persuasiveness of the narrative, philosophical, emotional etc. context.

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